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A Wheat Farmer’s Life

**Introduction**

Through out my life I have lived in very urban areas; large cities such as Spokane, Seattle, and Portland have been the only way of life I have ever known. I never knew a place existed where people leave their keys in their vehicles and let other people drive their vehicle if it is in the way. A place like this does exist; it’s called the farm land of Sprague, WA. After watching television shows and reading a wide variety of books I learned a little bit about farm life, I knew what a combine was, knew harvest took a long time, and knew farmers usually have close family ties. One thing I never understood was why they chose this kind of life style. The farmers near Sprague, WA are only 30 minutes away from Spokane, and a mere 15 away from Cheney. They could have chosen to move to the city and get an urban job, but they pride themselves on staying and working on the farms. This lifestyle has always intrigued me.

For this assignment I decided to further my understanding of the lifestyle just a minutes’ drive away from where I; the lifestyle of a wheat farmer. My goals were to understand what is important to a farmer in terms of the survival of the farm, what they do for fun, why their family ties are so close. My boyfriend is from the small city of Sprague, WA and grew up in this environment. His parents still live out there and his mom, Aubrey, is the Mayor of the City. I thought to myself, who else would be better to talk to about conducting my research than his mom! She encouraged me to come to Sprague to learn about wheat farmers. I spent four weekends in Sprague, WA conducting my research by going to city meetings to see what the civil issues in a small community are, taking part in their annual Muddin’ event, and spending some one-on-one time with a local wheat farmer and his family. Not only did I want to understand their way of life by talking to them, but I wanted to live in their shoes for a few days! I felt I would never get a true understanding of what and why they do what they do until I lived their way of life. Since I had been to Sprague, WA a few times prior to this assignment, I had a little bit of an idea of what I was getting into. I knew I would be getting my hands dirty, to wear work clothes, and to be well rested because I was going to be doing some hard work! Aubrey introduced me to the Sheffels family who welcomed me in, and while they referred to me as a city kid, I believe they respected me for the hard work I was putting in on their farm.

**Data Presentation & Analysis**

To begin my research I went to a city meeting with Aubrey, the city Mayor. I believed that by understanding what issues are brought up, I would get a feel of what is important in this city. After arriving at city hall, I was very surprised to find everyone from the town and farmers from the area there. It was not formal like in Spokane, WA. Rather, Aubrey and the other 4 city council members sat at the front of the room and everyone else sat in chairs places around a large room. When the meeting began, I really came to realize informal this meeting really was. The members of the city spoke up when there was no one else talking; they stated problems they had with their neighbors such as driving too fast, drunken brawls in people’s yards the night before, and how the price of gas was going up. Since everyone knew everyone else they addressed each other directly whether it was a neighbor or the store owner. One occurring item that came up was the price of gas. This is when the farmers really spoke up and addresses the gas station owner. The diesel fuel they use is not the same as what we find in the city at our gas pumps. Their diesel is specifically made for farm machines and is chemically different than the diesel at city gas pumps. The gas is also cheaper and taxed differently than diesel at city gas pumps and is tinted a bright red color to indicate it is for farm equipment only. If a road vehicle is pulled over and is found to have farm diesel in their vehicle, there is a $1,000 fine. The farmers of Sprague were saying that the recent price increase is hurting them very bad, and they believed the owner of the store was raising the price to help pay for his debt. It was a heated debate to say the least. This is when city council stepped in and helped find a solution to this issue. This experience showed me how diesel fuel really is the blood of the farm work. Without it, their machines won’t run, their crops can’t be tended, and harvesting it is out of the question.

The next visit I took to Sprague was to attend their annual Muddin trip. My boyfriend used to go to this when he was a kid but hadn’t been in years so he was more than excited to take me! We climbed in his work truck that he leaves in Sprague and met up with the rest of the group who were the farmers and city residents around 8am. From there, we drove in a group out to a bull farmer’s piece of property. This farmer has the annual Muddin’ event take place on his land for the past 15 years and from what I could tell by his enthusiasm, absolutely loves the event! He has over 300 bulls that roam his land and owns 1000+ acres so the bulls stayed clear of us, for the most part. After driving for a good hour up and down hills, rocks, and scab land, we came across one of the many large mud holes and the game was on! Trucks of all sizes; jeeps, blazers, Jimmy’s, Chevy’s and Fords alike took turns driving through this mud whole that was over a quarter mile wide and half mile long. I got the sense that driving through the mud and getting a little dirty was like an initiation to their group so before I interviewed the farmers I made sure to drive the truck a few times through the mud to earn their respect. Below is a picture right after the first run through when my boyfriend drove, as you can see, this is a messy event! Now that I had some mud on me, I gave it my all and I drove the truck through the mud! Now I knew I had proven myself as more than a city chick, there was a little “Country” to me many of the farmers exclaimed!



Now that I had been “initiated,” I went and interviewed the majority of the farmers attending. “Muddin is our time to get off the farm, relax, and have a great time with the community. It’s also an unspoken competition to see who has the best truck and can go through the deepest parts without getting stuck” one farmer said to me. Spring outlets which are invisible from the surface of the mud and are sudden holes 6’-up to 10’ deep pose a threat in this sport but the farmers say it tests their “guts” and driving skills if a person drives into one. My boyfriend and I were the lucky ones of the group and drove into one of these Spring outlets, below is a picture an onlooker took. Keep in mind that the tailgate which is level to the water is normally 5 feet off the ground. After a quick jumpstart we were able to get the truck unstuck and I believe I earned even more respect from the farmers after I maneuvered the vehicle out of the outlet.



One common theme the farmers said was Muddin’ is one of the highlights of the year because it’s a way to relax and forget about their responsibilities for one day and is also fun because of the competition and bragging rights a person gets after an epic run. On the drive home I reflected on the events of the day and came to the conclusion the farmers in the area go Muddin’ because it is honest fun, is a test of their workmanship on their vehicles, and a test of bravery to drive through these mud holes where Spring outlets are present. I know knew this is what farmers do for fun!

Now that I knew what farmers did for fun, I wanted to know why their family ties are so close. To find this out, I went and worked on the Sheffels farm for two weekends. We worked on the fields spraying eco-friendly insecticide and prepped the combines for Harvest. I was surprised to see that the whole family came out and worked on the farm. Mother, Daughter, Son, and Father all worked hard with their day beginning at sunrise. I got to know the daughter, Alison, who is 18 just three years younger than me, when we were trying to patch one of the combine tires. She explained to my why the family is so close to one another. It is because they work with one another every day, and there are jobs that require a large amount of trust of one another. For example, when working on the combine engine, it is a dangerous machine that could easily take off an arm or leg if you’re not careful. The person operating the combine has to know what they are doing and the person inspecting for trouble has to trust the operator won’t make any mistakes. This made sense to me, the work they do can be life threatening so they have to trust their family members literally with their life! Also, I came to understand they respected every family member because of the hard work and dedication they each show working on the farm. This level of trust and respect is the underlying reason to close family ties in farmer’s families.

**Cross-Cultural Comparison**

In my regular life, I wake up around 10am to go to work two days a week, and on the other five days a week sleep in until 11am. I do homework, keep the house clean, and make sure the yard work is done. Working and living on a farm is completely different than my laid back life style. I feel that their way of life, even though it is 180 degrees different than mine, is one that a lot of moral lessons can be learned from. Work hard, Respect, and Family are some of the most important things to farmers.

Finding out how important Farming diesel is to the farmers was a shocker honestly. I mean yea, it’s a pain when gas prices go up and I’ll complain every once in a while about the inconvenience, but to me high gas prices are merely an inconvenience. I have other forms of transportations such a riding my bike or the bus. To the farmers, high gas prices threaten their whole livelihood! To have gas to keep the farm machines working is crucial, if they cannot afford gas they do not have a way to pay their bills, put food on the table, and keep a roof over their head.

Farmers way of having fun, I have to say, is a blast! For fun, I do things such a mountain bike, hike wilderness trails, and go to the local lakes. In this region, farmers take part in the annual Muddin’ event where the whole community gets involved. Since this is an annual event, the farmers look forward to it and prepare their vehicles whenever they get a chance. It promotes cohesion in this region, and keeps the community close even though on a regular basis, they would not run into each other at all other than city meetings.

The amount of trust and respect the Sheffel’s family has for one another is something I have never experienced before. I come from a divorced home in which my parents played a very little role in my life. I do not know what it’s like to have close family ties and the Sheffels family was completely opposite! These family members have to trust their lives to one another, this is something I could not imagine doing in my family. It is a closeness that in a way I envy and hope when I start my own family we will have even a slight resemblance to the Sheffels family.

Even though there were huge differences between my culture and the culture of farmers at the end of the day we are not that different. Farmers and I both fight for what is important to us, we love to have a good time, and when we do work we do it with pride.

**Conclusion**:

The four weekends I spent in Sprague answered my three goals of understanding what is important to a farmer in terms of the survival of the farm, what they do for fun, why their family ties are so close. This experience also opened the door to many more questions about this lifestyle. What role does the education system such as College play in the family’s life? What happens when the daughter or son of a family gets married? When the parents of the farm reach old age what happens to them and to the farm? How does religion play into their life? The list goes on and on of questions I still have. I believe my friendship with Alison and the Sheffels family will be a lasting one. I intend to learn more about their lifestyle and look forward to helping them on their farm during harvest. This has been a great chance to study hardworking, respectable people and I feel privileged to be accepted into their culture.